



Work-related stress

Executive summary

Introduction

This report deals with the phenomenon of work-related stress. It looks at the most important risk factors and whether they are related to demands at work or to organisational aspects. It also examines the potential outcomes of stress at individual, organisational and societal level. Work-related stress has been identified as a significant cause of absence from work and is associated with ill-health outcomes such as cardiovascular diseases, musculoskeletal disorders and repetitive strain injuries. The report also examines how the phenomenon has been dealt with across the EU and looks at interventions set up to prevent and manage work-related stress. The report is based on national contributions from the EU27 Member States and Norway.

Policy context

Work-related stress has been a growing concern both for employees and employers. It constitutes a major cost to companies, workers and society due to the associated absence from work and, in some cases and circumstances, increased morbidity. Acknowledging the importance, the European-level social partners concluded a European Framework Agreement on Work-Related Stress in 2004 which aimed at raising awareness of employers, employees and their representatives for the phenomenon. A variety of initiatives, using different methods, have since been implemented in the Member States. They range from social partner framework agreements to collective agreements at national, sectoral and company level, also including national legislation and tripartite cooperation with public authorities. So far, despite reported difficulties in its implementation, the European framework agreement was assessed by the European Social Partners as an 'important added value in

the area of work-related stress.' Currently, this topic is even more relevant due to the increased levels of organisational change and uncertainty resulting from the economic crisis, which are likely to provoke stress.

Key Findings

Work-related stress is difficult to measure and evaluate as it is challenging to operationalise the concept. Much depends on definitions and methodologies selected. Trends on the incidence of work-related stress tend to vary between countries. Data reported in the national contributions provide evidence of an increase of work-related stress in, for example, Germany, Denmark, Estonia and Ireland, a decline in Finland, Sweden, Romania and Norway and rather stable levels in Belgium and the United Kingdom.

Specific occupations seem to be more likely to suffer from work-related stress. Female workers are more likely to report higher incidences of stress than men. Age, on the other hand, does not seem to have a clear relationship with stress as studies from different countries present contradicting findings. A Danish study shows that individuals who work in an area which demands a lower range of skills have lower levels of stress while studies from the Czech Republic, Poland and Spain confirm that stress incidence tends to rise with the educational level.

The most obvious risk factors are linked to quantitative and qualitative work demands: workload, quantity and intensity of work and working hours contribute to stress as do emotional and cognitive demands. However, the report also explores the role of the degree of autonomy and control. A low level of

autonomy and control over one's work, combined with high level of demands, are likely to lead to work-related stress. Organisational change is also recognised as a potential stress factor. In a UK survey of safety representatives, for example, it was the third most cited stress factor. Good communication and involvement of employees, on the other hand, seems to have a soothing effect, diminishing stress linked to the uncertainty created during re-organisation and restructuring processes. Also, the view that employees hold of themselves and their role in their organisations may play a part. An unclear role or a feeling of incompatibility between the values of individuals and the organisation can cause significant levels of stress. Moreover, if the reward policy is not clear and not properly linked to the employees' role in the organisation this may lead to increased levels of stress. Some countries report that bullying and violence at work is also a significant stress factor.

When examining the outcomes of work-related stress, it is crucial to consider not only the individual consequences but also organisational and societal outcomes. The report draws from a range of studies throughout Europe to show that exposure to work-related stress is likely to lead, over time, to health problems such as cardiovascular diseases, musculoskeletal disorders, minor depression, anxiety, digestive problems and long-term mental health problems. Absence from work seems to be the most relevant organisational outcome as it entails costs for employers in terms of funding sick pay and finding substitutes. Other organisational outcomes, which are possibly harder to define and measure, include reduced motivation, and an impact on engagement, productivity, quality of products and services and even innovation capacity related to reduced performance and high staff turnover.

The recession has certainly not helped to alleviate work-related stress. Increased fear of job loss, higher work demands and work intensity and increased role ambiguity as consequences of re-organisation and restructuring are the main reasons for an increase of psychosocial risks at work and therefore of work-related stress. Some countries have tackled the issue. Malta, for example, offers governmental support to

workers affected by privatisation and restructuring processes. In the UK, the Health and Safety Executive developed a tool to help organisations to effectively manage and control the risks of work-related stress, including during situations of organisational change highlighting the key role that prevention can play in tackling this issue. Companies are also addressing the issue, ultimately aiming at reducing sickness absence related to stress and increasing workers wellbeing.

Policy Pointers

- Work-related stress is a complex topic. Increased understanding requires the provision and analysis of information from different sources. Particularly the development of further survey instruments could contribute to a better understanding.
- It seems easier to measure and quantify the outcomes of work-related stress at the individual and societal levels. Organisational outcomes seem to be harder to define and measure. Expansion of research on organisational outcomes of work-related stress is needed, namely in terms of methodologies allowing monitoring and analysing the incidence of work-related stress at organisational level.
- Good communication, especially during times of great difficulty and uncertainty such as restructuring or re-organisation processes, is likely to have a positive effect on stress levels. If the workforce trusts its management and feels that management is doing its best to communicate with and involve employees, this is likely to result in lower stress levels.
- With a few exceptions, the debate on work-related stress is possibly less advanced in the new Member States. At the same time, these Member States are showing a higher occurrence of stress when compared with the EU15. This situation should be taken into account when developing cross-country initiatives dealing with work-related stress.

Further information

The report on *Work-related stress* is available online at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ewco/studies/tn1004059s/index.htm>

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